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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 004647

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SUBJECT: FREEDOM AGENDA: ENERGY MINISTER'S VIEWS ON
ELECTORAL DISTRICT REFORM, PRESS LAW, PARTIES, AND FAMILY
MATTERS

REF: STATE 152818

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reason 1.4 (b)

11. (C) Summary: Responding to the Ambassador's inquiries about elements of the "Freedom Agenda" during a meeting on October 30, ruling family member and Energy Minister Shaykh Ahmad Fahd Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah said most National Assembly members "don't know how many voting constituencies they want," and that those who have even agreed on the same number "don't know what kind (of system) they want." While on one hand he said that "the Government is serious" about its proposal to reduce the number of electoral districts, he indicated that it would not really matter whether the number ended up being one, five, ten or thirty. "The only surprise (in the outcome of the voting under a new constituency plan) would be the first time," he explained, "then you know how to get what you want."

12. (C) Shaykh Ahmad said that he thought the new press law would go through and that it was "a good law." He said that he saw political parties as an inevitability (that he had long supported), and that the GOK would "have to accept it." The Minister offered a guarded but candid assessment of the Al-Sabah family's succession plans, saying "we are a traditional family, and will solve family issues in a traditional way." While he vaguely referred to something happening "after Ramadan," he was clear in indicating that it was the Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah, and not the Amir, who was the main force slowing any effort to nudge aside the ailing Crown Prince.

13. (C) Comment: Shaykh Ahmed is a lightning rod for those in Kuwait critical of the government. He is often accused of corruption, but specifics are rarely supplied. He has, by far, the highest political profile of any the "next generation" Al-Sabah family members and, also unlike most of the Al-Sabah family, he actually enjoys the rough and tumble of internal politics. He also relishes the high visibility accorded to him as OPEC Chairman during the phenomenal rise in oil prices in 2005. While he shows a few signs of restlessness with the ponderous decision-making tempo of the older generation of Al-Sababs, (he's 42), he is loyal to Shaykh Sabah, while being well-positioned and possessing plenty of time to move up the leadership ladder. (End Summary/Comment)

Constituencies: "1, 5, 10, It Doesn't Matter"

14. (C) During an October 30 meeting with ruling family member and Energy Minister Shaykh Ahmad Fahd Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the Ambassador asked for the Minister's thoughts on a number of Freedom Agenda items (reftel). The Minister said that "some National Assembly members want five, some ten, and some thirty" electoral constituencies, and that even the ones who agreed on a number, such as the GOK-supported proposal of ten, did not know "what kind of ten they want." While he said that the GOK "is serious" about its proposal to reduce the number of electoral districts, he also said that "it would not really matter how many" in the long run. "One, five, ten," he joked, "it doesn't matter to us."

15. (C) Shaykh Ahmad said that the more important issue related to reform of the districts would be changing the rules so that, if there were ten electoral districts with five representatives elected from each one, each voter could only vote for two candidates. That way, he explained, there would be more diverse representation among each constituency, and more even representation across the different religious, social and political groups in Kuwait. He compared any future electoral districting changes to the recent decision to grant women the right to vote: "The only surprises would occur the first time that women exercised their vote and the first time voting was conducted in a new district format. After that, "you know how to get what you want."

Press Law "Good", Political Parties "Will Happen"

16. (C) The Minister said that he thought the new press law would pass through the National Assembly, and that it was "a good law." His said there should be proper punishment for libel and defamation by the press. "If you keep the fines high enough (for libel)," he said, "you can allow as much freedom of the press as you want." He noted that the only point of the law still under internal discussion was whether the Council of Ministers should have a role in approving new media outlets. He opined that this would be a good idea in the beginning, but that it was not a major issue that would hold up the legislation.

17. (C) Political parties are an inevitability in Kuwait, Shaykh Ahmad explained, recalling that he had advocated for political parties five years ago. "Parties will happen now or in the future," he said, "we (the Al-Sabah) have to accept it." On all of these issues, he noted, the GOK must go "stage by stage" and not try to do too much at once.

It's All In The Family

18. (C) When asked about the recent public discussion of succession plans for the country's leadership, Shaykh Ahmad was both vague and surprisingly candid. He said that the Al-Sabah are "a traditional family, and will solve family issues in a traditional way." At one point he vaguely referred to something happening "after the Eid," but did not provide any additional details. He seemed to draw a distinction between himself and those in the ruling family around his age, and the older generation made up of the Amir, Crown Prince, Prime Minister and National Guard Chief Shaykh Salem Al-Ali Al-Salem Al-Sabah. "Their generation has their points, their way," he said, "we just have to accept it."

19. (C) He said that Shaykh Salem's recent comments calling for the formation of a tripartite committee to run the country did not surprise anyone in the leadership, because "they all came up together" and the Amir, Crown Prince and Prime Minister "know that Shaykh Salem is not a statesman" and could not take a leadership position himself. He said that, besides the publicly reported statements by the Amir of his trust in the Prime Minister, the Amir has said the same thing numerous times in private gatherings and other settings. Shaykh Fahd said that, despite the accepted wisdom that it was the Amir who was keen to keep the Crown Prince in his position, the "real story" was that the Prime Minister was the main supporter of going slow in moving the ailing Crown Prince aside. He said that the Amir had complete trust in Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah.

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